

**Sahara or Sahel? The fuzzy
geography of terrorism in
West Africa**

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Sahara or Sahel? The fuzzy geography of terrorism in West Africa¹

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Abstract

Since the mid-2000s, terrorism has pushed the peripheries of West Africa into the news and the public eye. While the political implications of this phenomenon have been extensively documented, most commentators have adopted a zonal approach to terrorism in which the Sahel and the Sahara are usually confused. This paper assumes that this confusion dramatically highlights the failure of academic and common geography to think beyond territories in West Africa, and to move away from a 'sedentary' vision of West African societies. The paper contributes to an understanding of the geographical locations of terrorism in West Africa by showing, firstly, what the main reasons behind the current confusion between the Sahel and Sahara are. Secondly, we show that this confusion arose from a territorial vision of space, which has important implications not only for local economic activities, but also for our own understanding of the spatiality of networks in West Africa.

Keywords: terrorism; space; networks; Social Network Analysis (SNA); Sahel; Sahara; West Africa.

JEL classification codes: C81, D85, L14

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Introduction

Since the taking hostage of 32 tourists in the Algerian Sahara in early 2003 by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), terrorism has pushed the peripheries of West Africa into the news and the public eye. From Mauritania to Chad, a score of kidnappings, killings and attacks claimed by Islamist groups have taken place, with eight Western aid workers and tourists, and at least 55 West African military and 73 terrorists killed as a result (see Appendix 1). Terrorism actions become possible through a combination of intense spatial mobility, which allows continuous circulation in desert areas, and a good knowledge of social networks, allowing terrorist groups to be supported by certain local actors. So far, the strategy of movement and network-based terrorism seems to defeat that of West African states, whose control of national territory and social networks is definitely lacking.

While the political and military implications of this phenomenon have been extensively documented, there is, however, considerable confusion surrounding the terms used to describe the spatiality of terrorism in West Africa. While some authors clearly identify the Sahelian and Saharan areas affected by this phenomenon (Ellis 2004, Keenan 2004a, 2004b, 2007, Antil 2006, Gutelius 2007), others use the words ‘Sahel’ and ‘Sahara’ indiscriminately to discuss the geographical context in which military and terrorist events take place (see Radu 2004 or Khatchadourian 2006). Frequently, the Sahel is compared with a vast sanctuary that is outside the control of the states, these states being globally referred to as ‘Sahelian states’ (Cline 2007, Zoubir 2009). According to Johnson (2009), for example, ‘much of the Sahel is vast, empty, trackless desert’, a description that would be more appropriate in describing the Sahara.

More surprisingly, some authors referring to the abductions of tourists and attacks of military forces that have occurred since the mid-2000s suggest that the Sahel – rather than the Sahara – is the real theatre for operations of Salafi terrorism in West Africa. This seems strange since the very name of the main terrorists group refers specifically to the ‘Islamic *Maghreb*’. Twenty or so Westerners are supposed to have been abducted ‘in the Sahel’ by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) over the last two years, according to *Le Monde* (Mandraud 2010). ‘Extreme dangers located in the Sahel’ are now threatening the lives of expatriates in this part of West Africa, according to *Jeune Afrique* (Barrada 2010), whereas, in the opinion of *Libération* ‘The Sahel is trapped in a war against Al Qaeda’ (Ayad 2010) (our translations).

This paper offers an alternative to these views. It assumes that the current confusion between the Sahara and the Sahel dramatically highlights the failure of academic and common geography to think beyond territories in West Africa and to move away from a ‘sedentary’ vision of West African societies. The paper contributes to an understanding of the geographical locations of terrorism in West Africa by showing, firstly, what the main reasons behind the current confusion between the Sahel and Sahara are. Secondly, the paper shows that this confusion arose from a territorial vision of space, which has important implications not only for local economic activities, but also for our own understanding of the spatiality of networks in West Africa.

Sahel vs. Sahara or Sahel-Sahara?

At least two main reasons explain why the geography of terrorism in West Africa is currently so ill-defined.

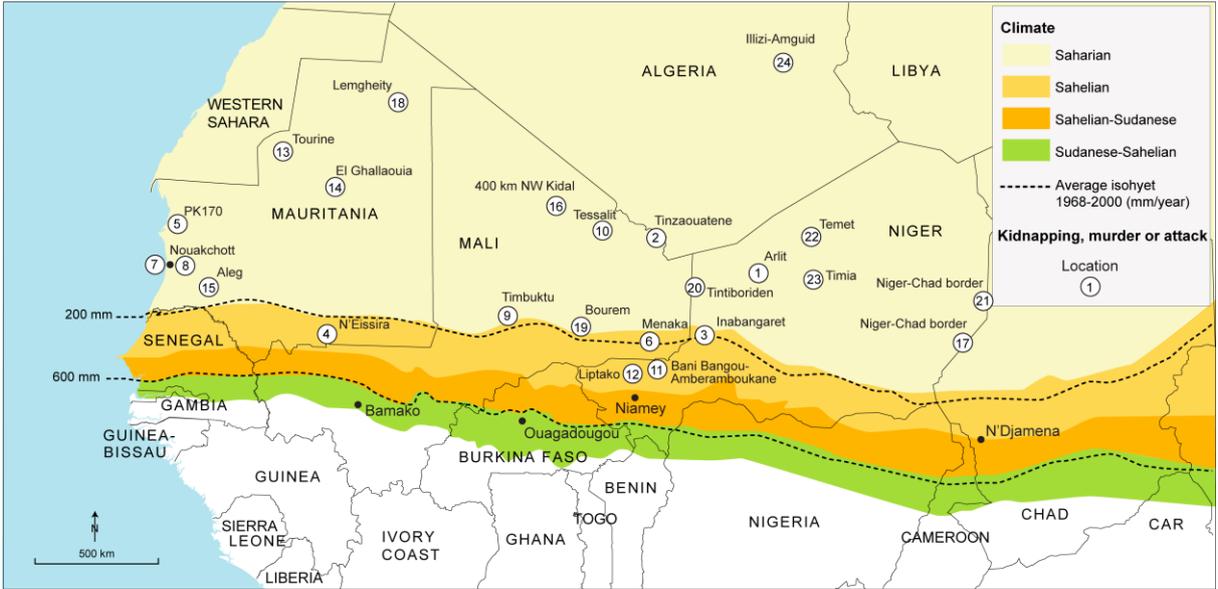
The Sahel and the Sahara are interconnected

The first reason is linked to the very definition of the Sahel. By naming *Sahel* the ‘shore’ reached after crossing the arid African Sahara, pre-colonial Arab traders had no idea how significant this term would hold today. After weeks spent walking alongside their camels, none of these merchants – incidentally proselytes of Islam – would have confused the Sahel with the Sahara they had left behind them. At the edge of the desert, pre-colonial ‘empires’ – as African historical studies have named them for want of a better word – were controlling the inter-continental trade routes which supplied North Africa with luxury goods, including ostrich feathers, gold and slaves from Sudanese kingdoms.

Later, environmental determinism in geography contributed to the confusion in the understanding of such a pattern of mobility, by dividing West African space into homogeneous entities on the basis of their bioclimatic features, type of production, and nomadic and sedentary ‘lifestyles’, with nomadic pastoralism as an intermediary. According to this zonal conception of space, the Sahel is a strip of semi-arid land stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to Chad, characterised by steppe vegetation, and limited by 100-200 and 600-700 mm of average annual rainfall. It is located between the Sahara to the north, and the Sudanese savannah to the south (see Map 1). Erratic rainfalls make such a definition very problematic and hypothetical. The reduction in rainfall since the late 1960s has notably led the southern border of the Sahara to move south, which means that the Sahel of today is not

where it used to be. This also explains the fact that several popular maps seen in the media, obviously based on the average rainfall from the 1960s, locate the Sahel much further north than its current position shown in this paper based on the Sahel and West Africa Club studies. This has important consequences for the interpretation of the spatiality of terrorism in West Africa, as this paper will show.

Map 1. Location of kidnappings, murders and attacks in West Africa since 2003 and climatic domains



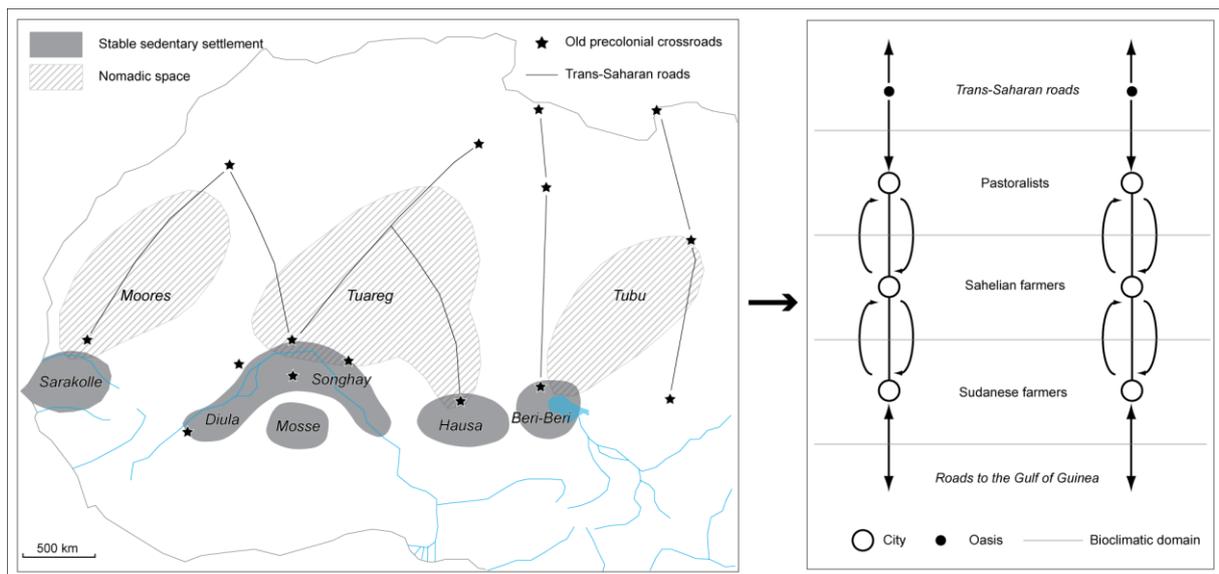
Sources: Sahel and West Africa Club and Centre Régional Agrhymet, Niger (Biogeography); Le Monde, Jeune Afrique, The New York Times, AFP, Ellis 2004, International Crisis Group 2005, Keenan 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2007, 2009, Cline 2007(Terrorism); Cartography: Sahel and West Africa Club/OECD 2005; modified by the authors. Note: see Appendix 1 for more information regarding each location.

The Sahel is moving...and so are too the Sahelian populations. West African societies have, for centuries, built on such uncertainty, by adopting a high mobility, well before colonial and post-colonial powers introduced a fixed and territorial perspective in the region. Far from being limited to a climatic domain, the Sahel is rather a space of movement (Retaillé 1989). Sahara and Sahel are indeed bound by an old spatial legacy in which trans-Saharan roads and sedentary settlements are organised, from North to South , around a linear system of cities. This line of cities has certainly moved since the beginning of the colonial period because of the creation of new administrative centres, but the spatial organisation has remained astonishingly durable. This is primarily explained by the fact that, contrary to naturalist descriptions, space is not organised along bioclimatic zones and lifestyles, but along social and economic exchanges: in such a circulation space, nomads and sedentary populations intertwine. Economic roads supplying the growing urban centres of the region, traditional

routes for nomadic cattle and camel, but also migration and illegal trafficking routes all demonstrate this willingness to use the space of flows to the detriment of the space of places (Retailié 1993).

Map 2 (left) shows more precisely how trans-Saharan roads and sedentary settlements are distributed in West Africa. Depending on weather conditions, political uncertainties, economic cycles, and demographic changes, the places organised in a linear way can ‘slide’ northward or southward since they are not fundamentally tied to fixed routes such as tarred roads, as shown by the stylised Map 2 (right). What matters most in such a spatial organisation is the maintenance of a high level of mobility. This form of integration is rather subtler than what the model based on a division of space between several zonal bioclimatic domains such as ‘Sahel’ or ‘Sahara’ separated by a fictitious boundary suggested.

Map 2. Sahel and Sahara



Source: authors

The spatial organisation in the Sahel-Saharan region makes clear that a purely zonal analysis of terrorist activities in West Africa does not make sense. A review of the location of kidnappings, murders and assaults since 2003 indicates that the Sahelian climatic domain has been less affected than the Sahara one (Map 1). Except for the kidnapping that occurred in the north-east of Niamey in December 2008, on the border between Mali and Niger, most terrorist attacks have occurred in what is known as the Sahara from a climatic point of view. The last kidnapping, which occurred in September 2010 in the mining town of Arlit in northern Niger,

confirms this trend (see Number 1 on Map 1). Moreover, frequently, Westerners abducted in the extreme north of the Sahel are then transported in the Malian Sahara, which offers a real ‘sanctuary’, unlike the most populated and heavily travelled Sahel. The reasons that make Malian Sahara a base for hostage-takers are notably linked to the intensification of anti-terrorism in Algeria. With the help of a large and well-equipped army and intelligence services, Algeria has succeeded in gradually pushing extremist groups outside its borders. Northern Mali has offered some tolerance vis-à-vis terrorists of the GSPC, who stayed there several months after their hostage-taking in 2003 (Keenan 2004a), is furthermore well known for illicit trafficking (Gutelius 2007), and its border with Algeria is no longer guarded by military posts, a consequence of the peace treaties signed with the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s (International Crisis Group 2005).

The Pan Sahel Initiative

The second reason why commentators confuse Sahara and Sahel in West Africa has much to do with the very history of this “new threat”. Everything begins after September 11 2001, when the United States Department of State implements the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), a programme dedicated to Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. The initial objective of the PSI was to support border control capabilities, control illicit trade and enhance regional security (GlobalSecurity.org 2010). The GSPC hostage-takings in the Algerian desert in 2003 then led the programme to focus more specifically on counter-terrorism (Ellis 2004). PSI notably allowed for the training of the special forces of West African states from the military bases of Bamako, Gao and Timbuktu in Mali and Atar in Mauritania. At that time, the programme was supporting “Sahelian states”, i.e. states which had at least part of their territory located in the Sahel region, but mainly threatened by the movements in the Sahara. PSI was replaced by the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), which involved, in addition, all the Maghreb states, as well as Burkina Faso, Senegal and Nigeria, and was incorporated in the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) created in 2007.

Common discourse has nevertheless held that the Sahel, as a whole, was a “dangerous area”. This interpretation is common in geopolitics, which usually considers the movement only as a consequence of the conflicting relationships between states and social actors, and not as a driving force in the production of space.

Understanding networks in West Africa

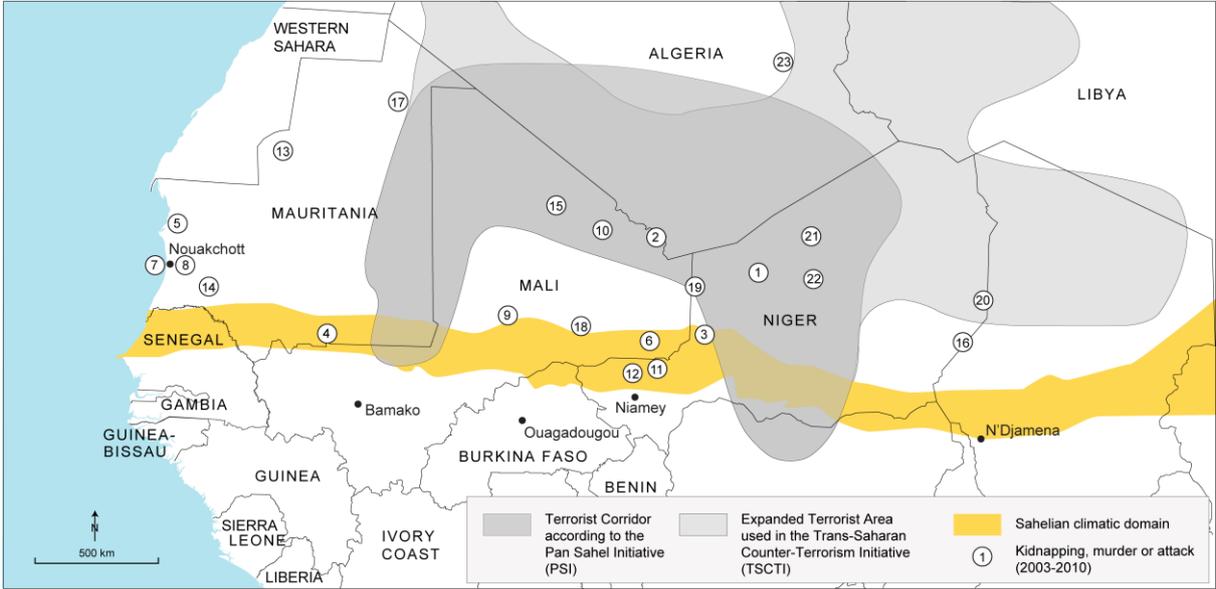
By mistaking the Sahel for the Sahara or by putting both of them in the same basket without linking them, the discourse on terrorism has important consequences for the tourism economy of West Africa. Compared to the 1998-2003 period during which one could easily travel from Mauritania to Niger, the Sahel-Sahara region is now almost totally considered as 'dangerous'. Warning messages from European and US Ministries of Foreign Affairs designed to discourage tourists from travelling throughout the entire territory of Mali, Mauritania and Niger because of 'a very high risk of kidnapping', have already led to a sharp drop in tourism activities.

According to Freund (2010), President of Le Point-Afrique, a pioneer airline company in West Africa, 40% of the passengers to Mopti have cancelled their flights, even though the city is located 300 km south of Timbuktu. The company has recently cancelled its flights to Agades (Niger), Gao (Mali), Tamanrasset, Djanet and Timimoun (Algeria) and suspended their flights to Atar (Mauritania) for security reasons. Destinations such as the Dogon Country (Mali) or the W National Park (Niger) have also suffered from the same problems, with important losses for the local populations involved in the tourism industry. Tourism is not the only activity likely to decline due to terrorism. Domestic economic activities could also be badly affected if the Sahel-Sahara area as a whole is considered a dangerous region, as reflected by the recent decision by Areva, a French energy company, to remove all European employees from the mining site of Arlit in Niger after seven of them were taken hostage in September 2010.

More generally, the confusion between Sahara and Sahel is an obstacle in understanding the spatial nature of terrorist networks in West Africa. Most of the media, raising the question of terrorism in West Africa, include a map showing the areas 'controlled' or an 'area of operations' of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. These areas cover a large part of Mauritania, northern Mali, almost all of Niger, northern Nigeria and northern Chad. According to Keenan (2009b), these maps were originally compiled by the United States European Command in charge of Africa and were used to justify the need of the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), and the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI). Based on a territorial vision of space, they give only a partial explanation for the terrorist movement and spatial organisation. Furthermore, most of the kidnappings, murders and attacks that have happened in the Sahara-

Sahel region since 2003 occurred outside the ‘Terrorist Corridor’ or ‘Terrorist Area’ (see Map 2). Needless to say, none of these Sahara-based maps depict the Sahelian climatic domain.

Map 3. Terrorist Corridor and Terrorist Area according to the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) and Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI)



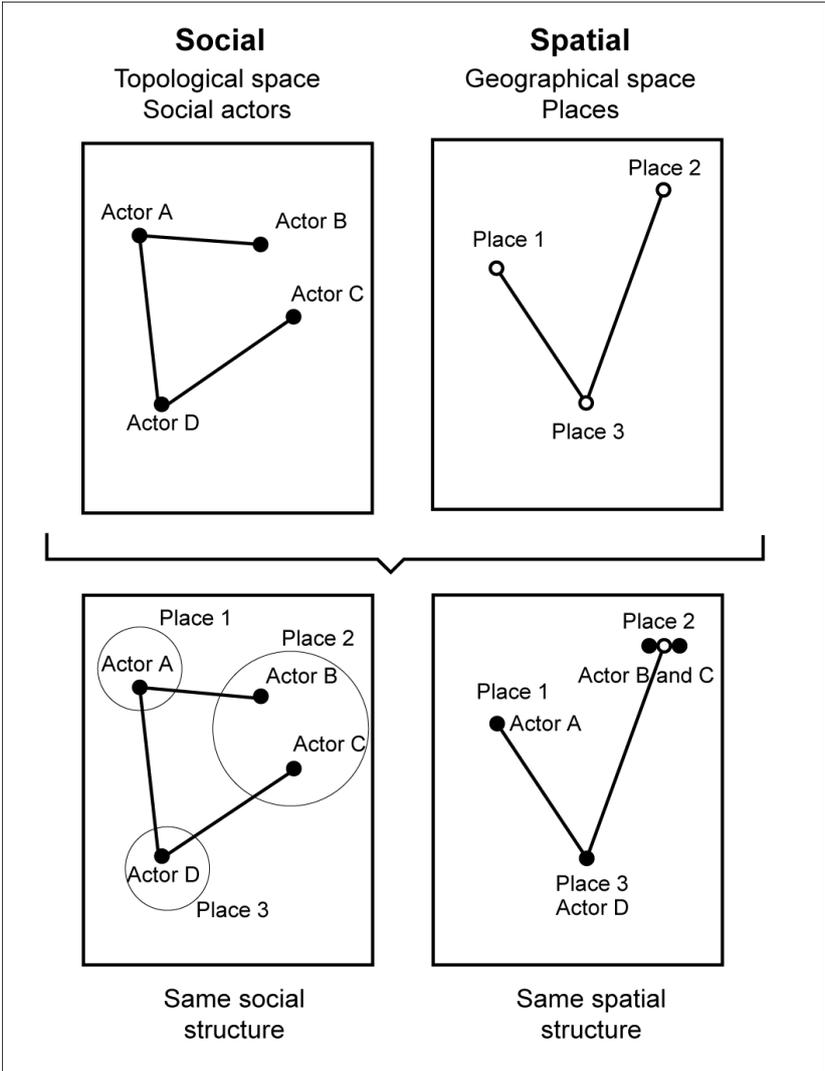
Sources: See Map 1; Keenan 2009b (PSI and TSCTI). Cartography: Sahel and West Africa Club/OECD 2005; modified by the authors. Note: see Appendix 1 for more information regarding each location.

An alternative to this kind of mapping would be to use social network analysis, a set of methods which have proved increasingly well suited to understanding network-based formal or informal organisations, including criminal and clandestine networks from a scholarly (Sparrow 1991, McMillain 1999, Klerks 2001, Kreps 2002, Ormerod 2006, Morselli, Giguère and Petit 2007) or military perspective (US Army 2006). Because space appears to be a key factor in terrorist networks, it would be particularly useful, in this respect, to spatialise social networks, i.e. to investigate ‘how an actor’s position in geographic space can be analysed simultaneously with his or her position in social networks’ (Radil, Flint and Tita 2010: 308).

As shown by Figure 1 this approach would first require examining the extent of the topological space consisting of all social actors (A, B, C and D) and their relationships. In this type of representation, the distances between network participants generally refer to their topological proximity, which is different from the distance commonly used in topographic mapping. The spatialisation of social networks would then require knowing, as precisely as possible, the location of the actors, i.e. the set of places (1, 2, 3 and 4) shared by the social actors in the geographic space as well as their relationships. By combining the network of

actors with the network of places, we would then obtain two types of representations: the first one maintains the topological structure of the network of social actors and portrays in which places they belong; the second one preserves the topographic structure of the network of places and indicates which actors are linked to these places.

Figure 1. Spatialising social networks



Source: authors

This approach has been recently explored by Radil, Flint and Tita (2010) in their study of Los Angeles gangs, and by Flint et al. (2009) in their geography of interstate conflicts during World War I. In both cases, however, social networks are located in a particular area: urban gangs show a strong attachment to their turf, and conflicts can easily be attached to one state or another. The case of terrorist networks in West Africa is different, in the sense that both the social and spatial embeddedness of these actors is highly mobile. Terrorists have shifting

alliances, depending on the amount of money they can use to buy secrecy and the level of trust they can establish with nomadic tribes. They also travel a lot to escape the military forces, look for new hostages, and communicate with other terrorists cells.

The example of the GSPC hostage-takers in 2003-2004 is particularly revealing of this dual property: the terrorists travelled thousands of miles from southern Algeria to northern Mali where they stayed for several months and established alliances with leaders of local nomads, before moving to Niger through the Azawagh, Aïr Mountains, the Ténéré, and eventually ending up in Tibesti (Chad) where they were killed or captured. This represents a first journey of over 3000 km from Algeria to Mali, according to the hostages interviewed (Keenan 2007: 33), and then a second journey of over 2500 km through some of the most inhospitable environments on the planet. Since then, other terrorists in the Sahel-Sahara have shown a similar tendency to move easily over long distances: this was notably the case of the Mauritanian terrorists who killed four tourists in Aleg in 2007 who moved to Mali and Senegal before they were eventually captured in Mauritania in April 2008.

Therefore, it is impossible to rely on physical distance, contiguity, particular *regions* or fixed *places* to understand the relative position of terrorist actors in space because these properties become mobile as well. This problem has already appeared in previous studies on the Sahel-Sahara societies, which have showed that the organisation of West African trade networks could hardly be approximated by static or purely hierarchical models, such as the central place theory (Walther 2008, 2009). In particular, the position and importance of urban markets did not correspond to the usual administrative or population hierarchies, which is explained by the fact that business activity is subject to constant change, in accordance with climatic, economic and political uncertainty. Contrary to what was found by spatial analysis in West Africa, the relative position and importance of urban markets (i.e. the centrality of places) is constrained by the presence of central economic actors (i.e. the centrality of traders).

A similar observation was made by Lechartier (2005) when analysing political networks in Mauritania. In his study, Lechartier noted that tribal groups experienced shifting alliances and frequent conflicts, which did not favour the establishment of territorial political districts but led to the creation of places where tribes could temporarily meet and negotiate. These places are made necessary due to the fact that the power of nomadic tribes is based on the control of distance rather than on the control of the surface (Retailié 1997), which reflects Castells' idea

(1996) according to which it is more important to control certain strategic nodes that struggling to control huge territories in the contemporary globalised world.

Of course, trade and political networks have very different objectives from terrorist networks. While the former pursue monetary and political ends, the latter are more ideologically driven and aim at spreading fear or, more prosaically, raising resources by taking Westerners hostage. However, trade and political networks on the one hand, and terrorist networks on the other, share certain *places*. Certain terrorists are said to be highly involved in illicit trade, such as Mokhtar ben Mokhtar in northern Mali for example, or have established alliances with local or national political leaders. Despite obvious differences, the accumulated knowledge about the spatial organisation of trade and political networks can be useful for a better understanding of terrorist networks because both of them produce places in the same way.

For both trade, political and terrorist networks in the Sahel-Sahara region, places are not fixed locations. In a world of permanent mobility, places are produced by the (often ephemeral) meeting of flows crisscrossing the Sahel-Sahara region rather than produced by a long-term investment in the territory, as in the 'sedentary' world of states. The space resulting from this particular form of spatial organisation has been described as a 'mobile space' (Retailié 1995, 2005, Retailié and Walther 2011). This reflects the fact that, for trade and terrorist networks, mobility is the overriding principle of spatial organisation. Places are, therefore, interconnected by a circulation system that can deal with temporal variations, depending on the season, political situation, or economic opportunities.

Conclusion

The spread of terrorism is an incentive to renew the tools usually used by geographers to analyse space in West Africa. On the one hand, it is no longer possible to rely on a zonal model to explain the structure of the Sahara and Sahel, which forms a single space of movement rather than a mosaic of semi-arid and arid lands. This paper suggests that the Sahel and Sahara should be seen as two interconnected spaces in the geography of terrorism in West Africa, with Sahara being increasingly used as a base for the kidnapping of Westerners. Sahara and Sahel should be considered as a continuum, something that the territorial approach of states and geopolitics prevent us from understanding.

On the other hand, it is no longer possible to rely on traditional cartographic representations to account for the organisation of networks. These must be analysed through new tools which are able to spatialise social networks. Spatial representations developed by geographers should take greater account of how space is culturally apprehended by social groups, and how it is physically used in daily practices. By considering the Sahelian and Saharan circulation, geographers should aim at thinking beyond territories (Retail  1989, 1993) and conceptualise such things as networks on the basis of its own dynamic, and not on the territorial model of the state.

More generally speaking, the study of networks in space should contribute to fill the ongoing divide between geopolitics and geography, as far as the incorporation of space into political analysis is concerned (see O'Loughlin 2000). The contribution of geography, highlighted in this article through the case of terrorism, is to suggest that movement is to be considered as a primordial force in the organisation of space and not as a consequence of flows occurring between fixed locations, as geopolitics and spatial analysis usually do. In such a 'mobile space', movement is first, and all geographical and cartographical references, anchored in fixed localities, fail. That is why another space theory is necessary, not only in the case of Sahelo-Saharan terrorism but, to understand the world beyond state (and territory) order.

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Appendix 1. Kidnapping, murders and attacks in West Africa since 2003

N°	Event	Location and date	Date	Release location and date	Casualties	Responsible
1	5 French, 1 Togolese, 1 Madagascan expatriates kidnapped ¹	Arlit, Niger	15.10.10	Moved to Mali	/	Abdelhamid Abou Zaïd
2	Security forces attacked ²	Tinzaouatene, Mali	30.06.10	/	11 military and police officers killed	Ibrahim Ag Bahanga
3	French aid worker kidnapped ²	Inabangaret, Niger, then moved to Mali	20.04.10	/	1 death, 25.07.10	AQIM
4	Italian-burkinabe couple kidnapped ²	N'Eissira, Mauritania	18.12.09	Mali, 16.04.09	/	AQIM
5	3 Spaniards kidnapped ²	PK170 (170 km north of Nouakchott)	29.11.09	Mali, 10.03.10, 23.08.10	/	AQIM
6	French aid worker kidnapped ²	Ménaka, Mali	26.11.09	Mali, 23.02.10	/	Abdelhamid Abou Zaïd
7	Suicide attack against French embassy ³	Nouakchott, Mauritania	08.08.09	/	Attacker killed, 2 police officers wounded	AQIM
8	American aid worker assaulted ³	Nouakchott, Mauritania	23.06.09	/	1 death	AQIM
9	Malian officer involved in the arrest of terrorist groups assaulted ³	Timbuktu, Mali	10.06.09	/	1 death	Unidentified assailants
10	Malian soldiers attacked ⁴	Tessalit, Mali	03-04.06.09	/	12 killed, some taken as hostages	AQIM
11	4 European tourists kidnapped ⁴	Bani Bangou – Amberamboukane, Niger	22.01.09	2 Swiss and 1 German released in Mali, 22.04.09, 12.07.09	1 Briton murdered in unknown location (31.05)	AQIM, probably passed on to Abdelhamid Abou Zaïd, Mokhtar Ben Mokhtar and Yahia Djouadi
12	2 Canadian diplomats kidnapped ⁴	Liptako (40 km north of Niamey)	14.12.08	Mali, 22.04.09	/	Fulani (?), passed to Abdelhamid Abou Zaïd and/or Mokhtar Ben Mokhtar
13	Military patrol attacked ⁵	Tourine, Mauritania	14.09.08	/	11 soldiers and a guide killed	AQIM
14	Military base attacked ¹²	El Ghallaouia, Mauritania (50 km N Ouadane)	26.12.07	/	3 soldiers killed	AQIM
15	French tourists attacked ¹	Aleg, Mauritania	24.12.07	/	4 killed, 1 wounded	AQIM (Maarouve Ould Habib)
16	Gun battle between Malian Tuareg rebels and GSPC fighters ⁵	Northern Mali, 400 km NW of Kidal	27.09.06	/	1 to 4 GSPC killed, 1 Tuareg killed	Malian Tuareg: The Democratic Alliance for Change

17	21 Italian, 1 German and 1 Brazilian tourists kidnapped ⁵	Niger-Chad border, north of Lake Chad	21.08.06	21 released 22.08.06, 2 Italian released 13.10.06	/	New Resistance Group (Chad), then Front des forces armées révolutionnaires du Sahara (FARS)
18	Military post attacked ⁶	Lemgheyti, Mauritania	June 05	/	15 soldiers killed, 17 wounded.	150 GSPC fighters
19	Attack on a humanitarian convoy ⁷	Near Bourem (100 km NW of Gao)	June 04	/	/	Unidentified assailants
20	Battle between Nigerien army and GSPC ⁸	Border with Mali (Tintiboriden)	April 04	/	Unknown	GSPC
21	Battle between Nigerien army and GSPC ⁸	Border with Chad	March 04	/	Unknown	GSPC
22	Tourists robbed ⁹	Temet, Aïr Mountains, Niger	23.02.04	/		Amar Saïfi GSPC
23	Tourists robbed ⁹	Timia, Aïr Mountains, Niger	24-25.01.04	/		GSPC (?)
24	32 German, Dutch, Swiss and Austrian tourists kidnapped ^{1,8,9,10,11}	Region between Illizi and Amguid, Algeria. Moved to northern Mali, then Aïr Mountains, Ténéré, Tibesti	Between 21.02.03 and 11.04.03	17 liberated in south Algeria on 13.05.03, 14 liberated in Mali on 18.08.03	7 terrorists killed in Algeria (13.05.03), 4 killed in Mali (01.04), 13 (or 30) killed in Mali (or Algeria). 43 killed in Chad (08.03.04). 1 hostage died of heat exhaustion (07.03)	Amar Saïfi and Abdelhamid Abou Zaïd

Sources: 1=AFP; 2= Barrada 2010. 3=Schmitt and Mekhennet 2009; 4=Keenan 2009a; 5=Keenan 2006; 6=Cline 2007; 7=Keenan 2004b; 8=International Crisis Group 2005; 9=Keenan 2009b; 10=Keenan 2007; 11=Ellis 2004a; 12=Choplin 2008.

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